

AMERICAN POETRY NOW

Edited by SYLVIA PLATH

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modern American writers*

CRITICAL QUARTERLY POETRY SUPPLEMENT
NUMBER 2

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INTRODUCTION

American Poetry Now is a selection of poems by new and/or youngish American poets for the most part unknown in Britain. I'll let the vigour and variety of these poems speak for themselves.

Daniel G. Hoffman's 'An Armada of Thirty Whales' is taken from his book of that title, Yale University Press; Howard Nemerov's 'I Only Am Escaped Alone To Tell Thee' and 'The Vacuum' from *The Salt Garden*, Little, Brown and Co.; George Starbuck's 'Ab Ovo' from *Bone Thoughts*, Yale University Press; William Stafford's 'In The Oregon Country', 'The Well Rising' and 'A Survey' from *West of Your City*, Talisman Press; Denise Levertov's 'The Five-Day Rain' from *With Eyes at The Back Of Our Heads* by Denise Levertov, Copyright © 1958, 1959 by Denise Levertov Goodman, reprinted by permission of New Directions, Publishers; Richard Wilbur's 'Potato' from *Poems 1943-1956*, Faber and Faber; Adrienne Rich's 'Living in Sin' from *The Diamond Cutters* by Adrienne Cecile Rich, copyright 1953 by Adrienne Rich Conrad, reprinted by permission of Harper and Brothers; W. S. Merwin's 'The Native' from *The Drunk In The Furnace*, Rupert Hart-Davis; Edgar Bowers's 'The Stoic: For Laura Von Courten' from *The Form of Loss* by Edgar Bowers, reprinted by permission of the publisher, Alan Swallow, copyright 1956 by Edgar Bowers; Anne Sexton's 'Kind Sir: These Woods' and 'Some Foreign Letters' from *To Bedlam and Back*, Houghton Mifflin Co.; and W. D. Snodgrass's 'The Marsh' and 'Operation' from *Heart's Needle* by permission of the Marvell Press, Hessle, Yorks. Barbara Guest's 'The Brown Studio', Anthony Hecht's 'More Light! More Light!', Hyam Plutzik's 'Concerning the Painting "Afternoon in Infinity" By Attilio Salemmi' and W. S. Merwin's 'Pedigrees' were first printed in *The Nation*, and W. S. Merwin's 'Another Year Come' in *The New Yorker*, © 1960 The New Yorker Magazine, Inc. Thanks are also due to Louis Simpson for permission to print 'The Dream Coast', to E. Lucas Myers for 'Fools Encountered', to Adrienne Rich for 'The Evil Eye' and 'Moving in Winter', and to Robert Creeley for 'The Way'.

Unfortunately it was not possible to obtain permission to print a poem by Gregory Corso.

Sylvia Plath



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OLIVER & BOYD

AN ARMADA OF THIRTY WHALES

(Galleons in sea-pomp) sails
over the emerald ocean.

The ceremonial motion
of their ponderous race is

given dandiacial graces
in the ballet of their geysers.

Eyes deep-set in whalebone vizors
have found a Floridian beach;

they leave their green world to fish.
Like the Pliocene midge, they declare

their element henceforth air.
What land they walk upon

becomes their Holy Land;
when these pilgrims have all found tongue

how their canticles shall be sung!
They nudge the beach with their noses,

eager for hedgerows and roses;
they raise their great snouts from the sea

and exulting gigantically
each trumpets a sousaphone wheeze

and stretches his finfitted knees.
But they who won't swim and can't stand

lie mired in mud and in sand,
And the sea and the wind and the worms

will contest the last will of the Sperms.

Daniel G. Hoffman

I ONLY AM ESCAPED ALONE TO TELL THEE

I tell you that I see her still
At the dark entrance of the hall.
One gas lamp burning near her shoulder
Shone also from her other side
Where hung the long inaccurate glass
Whose pictures were as troubled water.
An immense shadow had its hand
Between us on the floor, and seemed
To hump the knuckles nervously,
A giant crab readying to walk,
Or a blanket moving in its sleep.

You will remember, with a smile
Instructed by movies to reminisce,
How strict her corsets must have been,
How the huge arrangements of her hair
Would certainly betray the least
Impassionate displacement there.
It was no rig for dallying,
And maybe only marriage could
Derange that queenly scaffolding—
As when a great ship, coming home,
Coasts in the harbor, dropping sail
And loosing all the tackle that had laced
Her in the long lanes . . .

I know

We need not draw this figure out.
But all that whalebone came from whales.
And all the whales lived in the sea,
In calm beneath the troubled glass,
Until the needle drew their blood.

I see her standing in the hall,
Where the mirror's lashed to blood and foam,
And the black flukes of agony
Beat at the air till the light blows out.

Howard Nemerov

THE VACUUM

The house is so quiet now
The vacuum cleaner sulks in the corner closet,
Its bag limp as a stopped lung, its mouth
Grinning into the floor, maybe at my
Slovenly life, my dog-dead youth.

I've lived this way long enough,
But when my old woman died her soul
Went into that vacuum cleaner, and I can't bear
To see the bag swell like a belly, eating the dust
And the woolen mice, and begin to howl

Because there is old filth everywhere
She used to crawl, in the corner and under the stair.
I know now how life is cheap as dirt,
And still the hungry, angry heart
Hangs on and howls, biting at air.

Howard Nemerov

AB OVO

Beak gumming my entrails,
wings elbowing my temples,
there's this bird wants out.

Suppose I just let crack,
and he rolls out the red neck,
where would you put your foot ?

If he bows a backward knee,
if he stands there woodenly,
is this a dove, or what ?

Lady, he may be moist,
liquid-tongued, not voiced,
with wattles on his throat.

Lady, in a word,
this fabled headlong bird
Love is a strange coot.

George Starbuck

IN THE OREGON COUNTRY

From old Fort Walla Walla and the Klickitats
to Umpqua near Port Orford, stinking fish tribes
massacred our founders, the thieving whites.

Chief Rotten Belly slew them at a feast;
Kamiakin riled the Snakes and Yakimas;
all spurted arrows through the Cascades west.

Those tribes became debris on their own lands:
Captain Jack's wide face above the rope,
his Modoc women dead with twitching hands.

The last and the most splendid, Nez Percé
Chief Joseph, fluttering eagles through Idaho,
dashed his pony-killing getaway.

They got him. Repeating rifles bored at his head,
and in one fell look Chief Joseph saw the game
out of that spiral mirror all explode.

Back of the Northwest map their country goes,
mountains yielding and hiding fold on fold,
gorged with yew trees that were good for bows.

William Stafford

THE WELL RISING

The well rising without sound,
the spring on a hillside,
the plowshare brimming through deep ground
everywhere in the field—

The sharp swallows in their swerve
flaring and hesitating
hunting for the final curve
coming closer and closer—

The swallow heart from wing beat to wing beat
counseling decision, decision:
thunderous examples. I place my feet
with care in such a world.

William Stafford

A SURVEY

Down in the Frantic Mountains
they say a canyon winds
crammed with hysterical water
hushed by placid sands.

They tried to map that country,
sent out a field boot crew,
but the river surged at night
and ripped the map in two.

So they sent out wildcats, printed
with intricate lines of fur,
to put their paws with such finesse
the ground was unaware.

Now only the wildcats know it,
patting a tentative paw,
soothing the hackles of ridges,
pouring past rocks and away.

The sun rakes that land each morning;
the mountains buck and scream.
By night the wildcats pad by
gazing it quiet again.

William Stafford

THE FIVE-DAY RAIN

The washing hanging from the lemon tree
in the rain
and the grass long and coarse.

Sequence broken, tension
of bitter-orange sunlight
frayed off.

So light a rain
fine shreds
pending above the rigid leaves.

Wear scarlet! Tear the green lemons
Off the tree! I don't want
to forget who I am, what has burned in me,
and hang limp and clean, an empty dress—

Denise Levertov

THE DREAM COAST

Here I am, troubling the dream coast
With my New York face,
Bearing among the realtors
And tennis-players my dark preoccupation.

There once was an epical clatter—
Voices and banjos, Tennessee, Ohio,
Rising like incense in the sight of heaven.
Today, there is an angel in the gate.

Lie back, Walt Whitman,
There, on the fabulous raft with the King and the Duke!
For the white row of the Marina
Faces the Rock. Turn round the wagons here.

Lie back! We cannot bear
The stars any more, those infinite spaces.
Let the realtors divide the mountain,
For they have already subdivided the valley.

Rectangular city blocks astonished
Herodotus in Babylon,
Cortez in Tenochtitlan,
And here's the same old city-planner, death.

We cannot turn or stay.
For though we sleep, and let the reins fall slack,
The great cloud-wagons move
In silence still, dreaming of the Pacific.

Louis Simpson

THE BROWN STUDIO

Walking into the room
after having spent a night in the grove
by the river
its duskiness surprised me.

The dark hours I had spent under foliage,
the forms I had seen were all sombre,
even the music was distinctly shady, the water
had left me melancholy, my hands I had rinsed

were muddy. I had seen only one bird with a bright wing, the rest were starlings,
the brownness alarmed me.

I saw the black stove, the black chair,
the black coat. I saw the easel, remembering it as
an ordinary wood tone, rather pale, I realized
it was inky, as were the drawings.

Of course you weren't there, but a photograph was.
Actually a negative. Your hair didn't show up at all.
Where that fairness had lit the open ground,
now there was an emptiness, beginning to darken.

I believed if I spoke,
if a word came from my throat
and entered this room whose walls had been turned,
it would be the color of the cape
We saw in Aix in the studio of Cézanne,
it hung near the death's head, the umbrella,
the palette cooled to grey,
if I spoke loudly enough,
knowing the arc from real to phantom.
the fall of my voice would be,
a dying brown.

Barbara Guest

POTATO FOR ANDRÉ DU BOUCHET

An underground grower, blind and a common brown;
Got a misshapen look, it's nudged where it could;
Simple as soil yet crowded as earth with all.

Cut open raw, it loses a cool clean stench,
Mineral acid seeping from pores of prest meal;
It is like breaching a strangely refreshing tomb:

Therein the taste of first stones, the hands of dead slaves,
Waters men drank in the earliest frightful woods,
Flint chips, and peat, and the cinders of buried camps.

Scrubbed under faucet water the planet skin
Polishes yellow, but tears to the plain insides;
Parching, the white's blue-hearted like hungry hands.

All of the cold dark kitchens, and war-frozen grey
Evening at window; I remember so many
Peeling potatoes quietly into chipt pails.

'It was potatoes saved us, then kept us alive.'
Then they had something to say akin to praise
For the mean earth-apples, too common to cherish or steal.

Times being hard, the Sikh and the Senegalese,
Hobo and Okie, the body of Jesus the Jew,
Vestigial virtues, are eaten; we shall survive.

What has not lost its savour shall hold us up,
And we are praising what saves us, what fills the need.
(Soon there'll be packets again, with Algerian fruits.)

Oh, it will not bear polish, the ancient potato,
Needn't be nourished by Caesars, will blow anywhere,
Hidden by nature, counted-on, stubborn and blind.

You may have noticed the bush that it pushes to air,
Comical-delicate, sometimes with second-rate flowers
Awkward and milky and beautiful only to hunger.

Richard Wilbur

FOOLS ENCOUNTERED

We fared to seek the Fair and Gay,
Nymphs rampant on a field of grapes
Fools, encountered on the way,
We bid have done with prancing japes

The fools came maundering, blub, behind
Their folly bruit in the trees
We turned with gestures and we twined,
We bound their foolish hands to knees

Their buttocks spreckled, saffron-pipped,
We weaned them to a chequered cage
The air came crystal as we stepped
To soil of an Eleusian age

The lotus-lilled river Phlack
We crossed in barges, tiered and blue,
We came upon Pan's cloven track
And slopes where briar and olive grew

Seven dancers on the hill
With motion wrought the airs of dawn
The leaves wrought angled light to fill
A blazon, of that motion borne

The distant rocks, the stirring beech,
The water was the only sound.
When banished to the world of speech
We stood with silence swathed and bound

E. Lucas Myers

THE EVIL EYE (from READINGS OF HISTORY)

Last night we sat with the stereopticon,
laughing at genre views of 1906,
till suddenly, gazing straight into
that fringed and tasseled parlor, where the vestal
spurns an unlikely suitor
with hairy-crested plants to right and left,
my heart sank. It was terrible.
I smelled the mildew in those swags of plush,
dust on the eyepiece bloomed to freaks of mould.
I knew beyond all doubt how dead that couple was.

Today, a fresh clean morning.
Your camera stabs me unawares,
right in my mortal part.
A womb of celluloid already
contains my dotage and my total absence.

Adrienne Rich

LIVING IN SIN

She had thought the studio would keep itself;
no dust upon the furniture of love.
Half heresy, to wish the taps less vocal,
the panes relieved of grime. A plate of pears,

a piano with a Persian shawl, a cat
stalking the picturesque amusing mouse
had risen at his urging.
Not that at five each separate stair would writhe
under the milkman's tramp; that morning light
so coldly would delineate the scraps
of last night's cheese and three sepulchral bottles;
that on the kitchen shelf among the saucers
a pair of beetle-eyes would fix her own—
envoy from some black village in the mouldings . . .
Meanwhile, he, with a yawn,
sounded a dozen notes upon the keyboard,
declared it out of tune, shrugged at the mirror,
rubbed at his beard, went out for cigarettes;
while she, jeered by the minor demons,
pulled back the sheets and made the bed and found
a towel to dust the table-top,
and let the coffee-pot boil over on the stove.
By evening she was back in love again,
though not so wholly but throughout the night
she woke sometimes to feel the daylight coming
like a relentless milkman up the stairs.

Adrienne Rich

MOVING IN WINTER

Their life, collapsed like unplayed cards,
Is carried piecemeal through the snow:
Headboard and footboard now, the bed
Where she has lain desiring him,
Where overhead his sleep will build
Its canopy to smother her once more;
Their table, by four elbows worn
Evening after evening while the wax runs down;
Mirrors grey with repeating them;
Bureaus coffining from the cold
Things that can shuffle in a drawer;
Carpets rolled up around those echoes
Which, shaken out, take wing and breed
New altercations, the old silences.

Adrienne Rich

“MORE LIGHT! MORE LIGHT!”

Composed in the Tower before his execution
Those moving verses, and being brought at that time
Painfully to the stake, submitted, declaring thus:
“I implore my God to witness that I have made no crime.”

Nor was he forsaken of courage, but the death was horrible,
The sack of gunpowder failing to ignite.
His legs were blistered sticks on which the black sap
Bubbled and burst as he howled for the Kindly Light.

And that was but one, and by no means one of the worst;
Permitted at least his pitiful dignity;
And such as were by made prayers in the name of Christ,
That shall judge all men, for his soul's tranquility.

We move now to outside a German wood.
Three men are there commanded to dig a hole
In which the two Jews are ordered to lie down
and be buried alive by the third, who is a Pole.

Not light from the shrine at Weimar beyond the hill
Nor light from heaven appeared. But he did refuse.
A Lüger settled back deeply in its glove.
He was ordered to change places with the Jews.

Much casual death had drained away their souls.
The thick dirt mounted toward the quivering chin.
When only the head was exposed the order came
To dig him out again and to get back in.

No light, no light in the blue Polish eye.
When he finished a riding boot packed down the earth.
The Lüger hovered lightly in its glove.
He was shot in the belly and in three hours bled to death.

No prayers or incense rose up in those hours
Which grew to be years, and every day came mute
Ghosts from the ovens, sifting through crisp air,
And settled upon his eyes in a black soot.

Anthony Hecht

CONCERNING THE PAINTING
“AFTERNOON IN INFINITY”
BY ATTILIO SALEMME

I saw some boards sleeping
In your high noon of the infinite.
On each you scribbled eyes, ears and a nose
And a mouth saying: “Since we are pieces of lumber,
We rest here.
Had we been lucky, and on another canvas,
We would be men, clasping the bride Time.”

Hyam Plutzik

THE NATIVE
FOR AGATHA AND STEPHEN FASSETT

He and his, unwashed all winter,
In that abandoned land in the punished
North, in a gnashing house sunk as a cheek,
Nest together, a bunting bundle crumpled
Like a handkerchief on the croaking
Back-broken bed jacked up in the kitchen; the clock
Soon stops, they just keep the cooker going; all
Kin to begin with when they crawl in under,
Who covers who they don't care.

He and his, in the settled cozy,
Steam like a kettle, rock-a-bye, the best
Went west long ago, got out from under,
Waved bye-bye to the steep scratched fields and scabby
Pastures: their chapped plaster of newspapers
Still chafes from the walls, and snags of string tattling
Of their rugs trail yet from stair-nails. The rest,
Never the loftiest, left to themselves,
Descended, descended.

Most that's his, at the best of times,
Looks about to fall: the propped porch lurches
Through a herd of licked machines crutched in their last
Seizures, each as ominously leaning
As the framed ancestors, trapped in their collars,
Beetling out of oval clouds from the black
Tops of the rooms, their unappeasable jowls
By nothing but frayed, faded cords leashed
To the leaking walls.

But they no more crash
Onto him and his than the cobwebs, or
The gritted rafters, though on the summer-people's
Solid houses the new-nailed shingles open
All over like doors, flap, decamp, the locked
Shutters peel wide to wag like clappers
At the clattering windows, and the cold chimneys
Scatter bricks downwind, like the smoking heads
Of dandelions.

In this threadbare barn, through
The roof like a snag-toothed graveyard the snow
Cradles and dives onto the pitched backs
Of his cow and the plowhorse each thin as hanging
Laundry, and it drifts deep on their spines
So that one beast or other, almost every winter
Lets its knees stiffly down and freezes hard
To the barn floor; but his summer employers
Always buy him others.

For there is no one else
Handy in summer, there in winter,
And he and his can dream at pleasure,
It is said, of houses burning, and do so
All through the cold, till the spooled snakes sleeping under
The stone dairy-floor stir with the turned year,
Waken, and sliding loose in their winter skins
Like air rising through thin ice, feed themselves forth
To inherit the earth.

W. S. Merwin

PEDIGREES

Considering the Conqueror's
Fish-eyed, rabbit-chinned
Progeny, chests and brains aped from the pigeon,

The Mayflower's spreading heritage
Of turkey wattles,
Crowned heads correct above skins of weasels,

The scions of robber barons
(Only too often
Rats constructed around livers of hens)

Those sports half hog, half horse,
The wallowing gentry,
Dowager ducks, titled ungulates,

What bestiality can we call our own,
We the ordinary
Descendants of Nobody?

W. S. Merwin

ANOTHER YEAR COME

I have nothing new to ask of you,
Future, heaven of the poor.
I am still wearing the same things.

I am still begging the same question
By the same light,
Eating the same stone,

And the hands of the clock still knock without entering.

W. S. Merwin

THE STOIC: FOR LAURA VON COURTEN

All winter long you listened for the boom
Of distant cannon wheeled into their place.
Sometimes outside beneath a bombers' moon
You stood alone to watch the searchlights trace

Their careful webs against the boding sky,
While miles away on Munich's vacant square
The bombs lunged down with an unruly cry
Whose blast you saw yet could but faintly hear.

And might have turned your eyes upon the gleam
Of a thousand years of snow, where near the clouds
The Alps ride massive to their full extreme,
And season after season glacier crowds

The dark, persistent smudge of conifers.
Or seen beyond the hedge and through the trees
The shadowy forms of cattle on the furze,
Their dim coats white with mist against the freeze.

Or thought instead of other times than these,
Of other countries and of other sights:
Eternal Venice sinking by degrees
Into the very water that she lights;

Reflected in canals, the lucid dome
Of Maria dell' Salute at your feet,
Her triple spires disfigured by the foam.
Remembered in Berlin the parks, the neat

Footpaths and lawns, the clean spring foliage,
Where just short weeks before, a bomb, unaimed,
Had freed a raging lion from its cage,
Which in the mottled dark that trees enflamed

Killed one who hurried homeward from the raid.
And by yourself there standing in the chill
You must, with so much known, have been afraid
And chosen such a mind of constant will,

Which, though all time corrode with constant hurt,
Remains, until it occupies no space,
That which it is; and passionless, inert,
Becomes at last no meaning and no place.

Edgar Bowers

THE WAY

My love's manners in bed
are not to be discussed by me,
as mine by her
I would not credit comment upon gracefully.

But I ride by that margin of the lake in
the wood, the castle;
and the excitement of strongholds;
and have a small boy's notion of doing good.

Oh well, I will say here,
knowing each man,
let you find a good wife too,
and love her as hard as you can.

Robert Creeley

KIND SIR: THESE WOODS

For a man needs only to be turned around once
with his eyes shut in this world to be lost . . . Not
till we are lost . . . do we begin to find ourselves.

Thoreau, *Walden*

Kind Sir: This is an old game
that we played when we were eight and ten.
Sometimes on The Island, in down Maine,
in late August, when the cold fog blew in
off the ocean, the forest between Dingley Dell
and grandfather's cottage grew white and strange.
It was as if every pine tree were a brown pole
we did not know; as if day had rearranged
into night and bats flew in sun. It was a trick
to turn around once and know you were lost;
knowing the crow's horn was crying in the dark,
knowing that supper would never come, that the coast's
cry of doom from that far away bell buoy's bell
said *your nursemaid is gone*. O Mademoiselle,
the rowboat rocked over. Then you were dead.
Turn around once, eyes tight, the thought in your head.

Kind Sir: Lost and of your same kind
I have turned around twice with my eyes sealed
and the woods were white and my night mind
saw such strange happenings, untold and unreal.
And opening my eyes, I am afraid of course
to look—this inward look that society scorns—
Still, I search in these woods and find nothing worse
than myself, caught between the grapes and the thorns.

Anne Sexton

SOME FOREIGN LETTERS

I knew you forever and you were always old,
soft white lady of my heart. Surely you would scold
me for sitting up late, reading your letters,
as if these foreign postmarks were meant for me.
You posted them first in London, wearing furs
and a new dress in the winter of eighteen-ninety.
I read how London is dull on Lord Mayor's Day,
where you guided past groups of robbers, the sad holes
of Whitechapel, clutching your pocketbook, on the way
to Jack the Ripper dissecting his famous bones.
This Wednesday in Berlin, you say, you will
go to a bazaar at Bismarck's house. And I
see you as a young girl in a good world still,
writing three generations before mine. I try
to reach into your page and breathe it back . . .
but life is a trick, life is a kitten in a sack.

This is the sack of time your death vacates.
How distant you are on your nickel-plated skates
in the skating park in Berlin, gliding past
me with your Count, while a military band
plays a Strauss waltz. I loved you last,
a pleated old lady with a crooked hand.
Once you read *Lohengrin* and every goose
hung high while you practised castle life
in Hanover. Tonight your letters reduce
history to a guess. The Count had a wife.
You were the old maid aunt who lived with us.

Tonight I read how the winter howled around
the towers of Schloss Schwöbber, how the tedious
language grew in your jaw, how you loved the sound
of the music of the rats tapping on the stone
floors. When you were mine you wore an earphone.

This is Wednesday, May 9th, near Lucerne,
Switzerland, sixty-nine years ago. I learn
your first climb up Mount San Salvatore;
this is the rocky path, the hole in your shoes,
the yankee girl, the iron interior
of her sweet body. You let the Count choose
your next climb. You went together, armed
with alpine stocks, with ham sandwiches
and *seltzer wasser*. You were not alarmed
by the thick woods of briars and bushes,
nor the rugged cliff, nor the first vertigo
up over Lake Lucerne. The Count sweated
with his coat off as you waded through top snow.
He held your hand and kissed you. You rattled
down on the train to catch a steamboat for home;
or other postmarks: Paris, Verona, Rome.

This is Italy. You learn its mother tongue.
I read how you walked on the Palatine among
the ruins of the palaces of the Caesars;
alone in the Roman autumn, alone since July.
When you were mine they wrapped you out of here
with your best hat over your face. I cried
because I was seventeen. I am older now.
I read how your student ticket admitted you
into the private chapel of the Vatican and how
you cheered with the others, as we used to do
on the Fourth of July. One Wednesday in November
you watched a balloon, painted like a silver ball,
float up over the Forum, up over the lost emperors,
to shiver its little modern cage in an occasional
breeze. You worked your New England conscience out
beside artisans, chestnut vendors and the devout.

Tonight I will learn to love you twice;
learn your first days, your mid-Victorian face.
Tonight I will speak up and interrupt
your letters, warning you that wars are coming,
that the Count will die, that you will accept
your America back to live like a prim thing
on the farm in Maine. I tell you, you will come
here, to the suburbs of Boston, to see the blue-nose
world go drunk each night, to see the handsome
children jitterbug, to feel your left ear close
one Friday at Symphony. And I tell you,
you will tip your boot feet out of that hall,
rocking from its sour sound, out onto
the crowded street, letting your spectacles fall
and your hair net tangle as you stop passers-by
to mumble your guilty love while your ears die.

Anne Sexton

THE MARSH

Swampstrife and spatterdock
lull in the heavy waters;
some thirty little frogs
spring with each step you walk;
a fish's belly glitters
tangled by rotting logs.

Over near the grey rocks
muskrats dip and circle.
Out of his rim of ooze
a silt-black pond snail walks
inverted on the surface
toward what food he may choose.

You look up; while you walk
the sun bobs and is snarled
in the enclosing weir
of trees, in their dead stalks.
Stick in the mud, old heart,
what are you doing here?

W. D. Snodgrass

OPERATION

From stainless steel basins of water
They brought warm cloths and they washed me,
From spun aluminium bowls, cold Zephiran sponges, fuming;
Gripped in the dead yellow glove, a bright straight razor
Inched on my stomach, down my groin,
Paring the brown hair off. They left me
White as a child, not frightened. I was not
Ashamed. They clothed me, then,
In the thin, loose, light, white garments,
The delicate sandals of poor Pierrot,
A schoolgirl first offering her sacrament.

I was drifting, inexorably, on toward sleep.
In skullcaps, masked, in blue-green gowns, attendants
Towed my cart, afloat in its white cloths,
The body with its tributary poisons borne
Down corridors of the diseased, thronging:
The scrofulous faces, contagious grim boys,
The huddled families, weeping, a staring woman
Arched to her gnarled stick—a child was somewhere
Screaming, screaming—then, blind silence, the elevator rising
To the arena, humming, vast with lights; blank hero,
Shackled and spellbound, to enact my deed.

Into flowers, into women, I have awakened.
Too weak to think of strength, I have thought all day,
Or dozed among standing friends. I lie in night, now,
A small mound under linen like the drifted snow.
Only by nurses visited, in radiance, saying, Rest.
Opposite, ranked office windows glare; headlamps, below,
Trace out our highways; their cargoes under dark tarpaulins,
Trucks climb, thundering, and sirens may
Wail for the fugitive. It is very still. In my brandy bowl
Of sweet peas at the window, the crystal world
Is inverted, slow and gay.

W. D. Snodgrass

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